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CENTRAL AMERICA

DEADLINE FOR DECISION

There are just five weeks left for the Reagan administration and the Congress to reach agreement on what kind of aid program, if any, should replace the \$27 million of U.S. humanitarian assistance to the "contra" guerrillas in Nicaragua that expires at the end of March.

Although an extension for another year of the current non-lethal assistance, openly administered by the State Department, could easily be won, President Ronald Reagan announced this week his decision to take a high-risk gamble on his ability to win bipartisan majority support for a \$100 million combination of covert military assistance and overt humanitarian aid.

In spite of cautionary warnings from the House of Representatives that the votes to avoid a damaging foreign-policy defeat may not be there, the administration is determined this year to ask for what it believes to be necessary rather than to settle for what it knows it can get. As the president recently put it, you can't fight attack helicopters "with Band-Aids and mosquito nets."

In order to win over enough votes from moderate Democrats and wavering Republicans, Reagan officials realize they have a complicated and difficult case to make. But recent events have helped to clarify the issues and to dramatize the consequences of doing nothing.

First, the hard realities of the fighting on the ground in Nicaragua demonstrate that the "contra" guerrillas cannot be expected to hold out indefinitely, if they are not given

more effective U.S. aid. Not only do they need shoulder-fired anti-aircraft weapons to keep the helicopters off their backs, but they need more mobile firepower to cope with the improving tactics of a Cuban-trained and Soviet-supplied Sandinista army.

Even some of the non-lethal aid authorized by Congress in the form of bandages and boots is not finding its way through the hesitant Honduran bureaucracy, and thousands of "contras" have retreated in good order to the border region to wait for essential logistical support.

The average age of the "contras" is 19, and only 2 percent of them ever served in Anastasio Somoza's national guard. Their national hero is Cardinal Obando y Bravo, and their morale remains high as they see many of their compatriots deserting the Sandinista army at the first opportunity. But the willingness of the local rural population to support them with food and shelter has already started to weaken, as Sandinista propaganda pounds away at the theme that American aid is too little and too late.

Perhaps the least understood aspect of the administration's proposed military aid program for the "contras" is the fact that if it is to be acceptable to neighboring countries it will have to be at least nominally covert and managed by the CIA. The purpose of this clandestinity is not to avoid debate in the U.S. Congress,

nor to hide something from the American people.

Rather, it is an attempt to take into account the fact that the governments of both Honduras and Costa

Rica cannot openly acquiesce in shipment of arms across their borders into Nicaragua, so long as they continue to maintain diplomatic relations with the Sandinista regime in Managua.

In taking the real risk of involvement, the Hondurans and Costa Ricans demand in return at least the fig leaf of deniability. As one top Reagan official explained, "If there is to be military aid, it will have to be covert."

Since the chairmen of both the House and Senate intelligence committees are on record against using the CIA to channel arms secretly to the "contras," the administration realizes that it has a major fight on its hands on this issue, and there is no easy way around the dilemma. The weapons that the "contras" desperately need can be sent through covert channels or not at all. The hope is that a majority in Congress has become sufficiently sophisticated to understand this.

Finally, there is the siren song of those well-intentioned senators and representatives who maintain that, with the expiration of non-lethal aid on March 31, all assistance to the "contras" should cease for at least three months in order to allow the Contadora process a chance to bring about a negotiated settlement.

Judging from past experience, the predictable reaction of the Sandinista regime to suspension of U.S. aid would be an escalation of the current assault on the guerrilla bases in an all-out effort to crush the "contras" once and for all before U.S. aid could be resumed.

With the dispersal and defeat of their internal armed opposition, the Sandinista *comandantes* would be free to devote their full time and attention to supporting the Marxist guerrillas in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.

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